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LORD GRENVILLE AND THE 'SMOKING GUN': THE PLOT TO ASSASSINATE THE FRENCH DIRECTORY IN 1798–1799 RECONSIDERED*

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ABSTRACT. *This article re-examines the evidence that has been used to claim that, in the aftermath of the collapse of the British secret service's counter-revolutionary plans in France in September 1797, foreign secretary Lord Grenville supported a French royalist plot to assassinate the Directory. It concludes that, although his agent James Talbot was actively involved and probably thought he had official permission to proceed, Grenville remained ignorant of the plot until December 1798. He subsequently ordered Talbot to withdraw from the conspiracy. Emphasis is placed on communications difficulties associated with undercover secret service activities in this era and on bureaucratic failures within the foreign office, together with evidence to suggest that Talbot was temperamentally unsuited to the role of intelligence officer.*

I

Around 1810, after his active political career as a government minister had come to an end, William, Lord Grenville embarked on his memoirs. He described the wars against revolutionary and Napoleonic France, which for the British had begun in February 1793, as 'Wars of unusual duration and ferocity; Anarchy and civil bloodshed, exiles, proscriptions, assassinations, and judicial murders, the worst species of the worst crime.'[1] The wars were fought in new ways, not only with competing ideologies and innovative strategies and battlefield tactics, but also with the silent weapons of clandestine secret services. As foreign secretary in William Pitt's ministry, Grenville played a major guiding role in this underground war, using British diplomats and secret agents to gather intelligence and to provide aid to the internal enemies of revolutionary France. This secret war was to become increasingly unscrupulous, reaching a peak with the Cadoudal plot to assassinate first consul

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[1] William, Lord Grenville, 'Commentaries of my own political life and of public transactions connected with it', British Library (BL) Add. MS 69130, p. 5, quoted in A. D. Harvey, *Collision of empires: Britain in three world wars, 1793–1945* (London, 1992), p. xi.

Bonaparte in 1803–4 and the subsequent judicial murder of the duc d'Enghien and the mysterious deaths of Gen. Pichegru and Capt. John Wesley Wright in the Temple prison in Paris.[2]

These events occurred while Grenville was in opposition, but recently it has been claimed that the British government, under Grenville's auspices, had been involved in assassination plots as early as 1798. The plot in question was facilitated by James Talbot, a secret agent operating undercover in Swabia, who sought to paralyse the executive arm of the revolutionary French government by financing and promoting a plan to assassinate the five members of the Directory and some of their ministers. Talbot's activities have long been known to historians, but it has usually been thought that they were unofficial. Harvey Mitchell, for instance, concluded in 1965 that Grenville was genuinely surprised and angry when he heard of Talbot's plotting. Talbot had apparently 'gone native', being tricked by extremist royalists into supporting a *coup de main*.[3] Elizabeth Sparrow, however, in articles and a book which benefit from sources unavailable to Mitchell, has now suggested that Grenville had supported Talbot's plan from its beginnings and that he ordered its cancellation only after its exposure was threatened.[4] If Sparrow is correct, not only did Grenville abandon Talbot, but he also deliberately falsified official records to hide his connection with 'the smoking gun'. Moreover, any conspiracy to hide embarrassing evidence must also have included at least three other officials in London: George Canning, undersecretary of state at the foreign office (and a future prime minister); Brook Taylor, Grenville's private secretary (and subsequently a diplomat on foreign service); and William Wickham, undersecretary of state at the home office (he later was chief secretary in Ireland).

The purpose of this article is to re-examine the evidence relating to James Talbot's mission in Swabia and to reassess Grenville's role in its genesis and outcome. The conclusions reached differ from both Mitchell's and Sparrow's: Grenville did not sanction an assassination plot before Talbot went to Swabia and remained unaware of its existence until December 1798; and Talbot was not the naïve victim of a royalist sting, but a reckless adventurer who nevertheless believed that he was acting with implicit government sanction. This is the tale of two men, one anxious to maximize the benefits of family clientage, but who allows his enthusiasm and ambition to cloud his judgement, and another who, with heavy responsibilities for winning the war against revolutionary France, set a limit to the lengths he would go to achieve his counter-revolutionary ends.

[2] Jean-François Chiappe, *Georges Cadoudal ou la liberté* (Paris, 1971); Paul Lombard, *Par le sang d'un prince: le duc d'Enghien* (Paris, 1986); B. Saugier, *Pichegru: histoire d'un suicide* (Aubenas, 1992); Tom Pocock, *A thirst for glory: the life of Admiral Sir Sidney Smith* (London, 1996).

[3] Harvey Mitchell, *The underground war against revolutionary France: the missions of William Wickham, 1794–1800* (Oxford, 1965), esp. pp. 219–27.

[4] Elizabeth Sparrow, 'The alien office, 1792–1806', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), p. 373; idem, 'The Swiss and Swabian agencies, 1795–1801', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), pp. 861–84; idem, *Secret service: British agents in France, 1792–1815* (Woodbridge, 1999), esp. pp. 145–73.

II

James Talbot's mission to Swabia came at a time when Britain's fortunes in the war with revolutionary France were at a low ebb. Although the country remained safe from invasion, a French army, under Napoleon Bonaparte's command, was being established on the Channel coast. Britain had only recently survived a major financial crisis and serious naval mutinies. The British fleet had been forced out of the Mediterranean; Ireland was bubbling up towards insurrection; and Britain's last ally in Europe, Austria, had signed a treaty with Bonaparte at Campo Formio in October 1797 and was currently engaged in further peace negotiations in the German town of Rastadt. Moreover, having forced by rough diplomatic means the removal from Berne of William Wickham, Britain's minister in Switzerland, the French were about to invade the cantons to establish the revolutionary Helvetic Republic.

Wickham's return to London at the end of 1797 was a triumph for the French, for they knew he was Britain's spymaster on the continent, responsible for organizing and funding all the counter-revolutionary activities in eastern and southern France.[5] From early 1795 he had been involved in attempts to co-ordinate insurrections in the French interior with an invasion by Austrian troops along the eastern border. More recently, he had supported royalists in their attempt to regain power by obtaining majorities in the two legislative *conseils* in Paris. Wickham's retreat was a further blow to a secret service which in the preceding months had been badly hit by the destruction of spy networks in Paris and by the Directory's coup d'état against the *conseils* in September (Fructidor). The arrest and deportation of many royalist leaders followed the collapse of eighteen months of counter-revolutionary planning and plotting.[6]

Wickham left his assistant James Talbot as *chargé d'affaires* in Berne, with orders to feign breaking contact with French royalist organizations, while at the same time secretly ensuring that these links remained intact for future use.[7] As secretary of legation in the Swiss mission since the previous February, Talbot had assisted Wickham in his clandestine activities.[8] Although thirty years of age, he was inexperienced in the arts of diplomacy, both secret and open. He was the second son of Richard Talbot of Malahide Castle, County Dublin, scion of an ancient Roman Catholic family which had only recently

[5] Wickham left Berne for Frankfurt on 7 Nov., ostensibly to visit Col. Charles Gregan Craufurd, who was still recovering from a serious wound sustained at the battle of Amburg in 1796. He arrived in England in late December. Talbot to Canning, 7 Nov. 1797, Bodleian Library, MS Talbot, c.14; Portland to Camden, 4 Jan. 1798, London, Public Record Office (PRO) HO100/75, fo. 3; Wickham to Grenville, 29 Dec. 1797, *The correspondence of the right honourable William Wickham* (hereafter Wickham, *Correspondence*), ed. William Wickham (2 vols., London, 1870), II, p. 67.

[6] In addition to Mitchell's and Sparrow's work, see W. R. Fryer, *Republic or restoration in France? 1794–1797* (Manchester, 1965); Sir John Hall, *General Pichegru's treason* (New York, 1915).

[7] Talbot to Grenville, 9 Nov. 1797, cipher, MS Talbot, c.14; Wickham to Grenville, 29 Dec. 1797, Wickham, *Correspondence*, II, p. 67.

[8] MS Talbot, c.12, fo. 47; Wickham to Zurich Burgomasters, 15 Mar. 1797, MS Talbot, b. 20.

converted to Protestantism, a sure sign of social and political ambitions.[9] The Talbots were distantly related to the Grenvilles through the marriage of Mary Nugent to Grenville's elder brother, the marquess of Buckingham.[10] The Grenvilles, especially Buckingham, were insatiable hunters of places, sinecures, and honours, both for themselves and their extended family.[11] In 1793 the Talbots entered the Grenvilles' orbit, when Buckingham brought James Talbot's elder brother Richard to Pitt's attention and helped him in his military career.[12] James, too, after an early manhood of complete obscurity, was soon vying for Buckingham's attention. His aim was to find a position in the foreign service that would be popular 'among the first people of the country' and might lead 'to the principal objects in the diplomatic line'.[13] In 1795, while staying at Buckingham's country seat of Stowe, he had given such 'very great assistance' in the arrangements for a family marriage – he had shown 'prudence and discretion in his management of the old lady' – that Buckingham persuaded Grenville to reward him with a job.[14] Grenville initially considered sending Talbot to France as a covert commissioner to the royalist armies in the west. Despite recognizing that 'the enterprize would be attended with equal if not greater personal risque than almost any in which I could possibly be engaged', Talbot was eager to go, but, in the event, the mission was abandoned as being too risky.[15] This was probably fortunate, for Talbot had been indiscreet. Not only did he leak the secret to his uncle, Sir George Nugent, in Dublin, but he also asked for his mother to be told.

Instead, Talbot, in the lowly position of writing clerk, accompanied the earl of Malmesbury to Paris on his first peace mission in October 1796. There he received his first taste of clandestine intrigue, for, although there were others in Malmesbury's suite who were responsible for espionage – including attempts to negotiate the release of Sir Sidney Smith from the Temple prison – Malmesbury was prepared to use Talbot to obtain low-grade

[9] See, for example, Oliver MacDonagh, *The inspector general: Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick and the politics of social reform, 1783–1802* (London, 1981), p. 22; Thomas Bartlett, *The fall and rise of the Irish nation: the Catholic question, 1690–1830* (Dublin, 1992), pp. 23, 112.

[10] John Beckett, *The rise and fall of the Grenvilles* (Manchester, 1994), p. 67.

[11] James J. Sack, *The Grenvillites, 1801–1829* (Urbana, 1979), p. 37. Thomas Paine wrote caustically of Lord Grenville: 'This man ought to be as strong in the back as a mule, or the *sire* of a mule, or it would crack with the weight of places and offices.' Thomas Paine, *Letter addressed to the addressers on the late proclamation* (1792), in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Moncure D. Conway (4 vols., New York, 1967), III, p. 49.

[12] *The history of parliament: the House of Commons, 1790–1820*, ed. R. G. Thorne (5 vols., London, 1986), V, 331.

[13] Talbot to Gov. [Sir George] Nugent, 2 June 1796, MS Talbot, c.12, fo. 1.

[14] Buckingham to Grenville, 24 Oct. 1795, in *Report on the manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue, esq, preserved at Dropmore* (hereafter *Dropmore papers*), ed. Walter Fitzpatrick (12 vols., London, 1899), III, p. 143.

[15] Talbot to Nugent, 2 June 1796, MS Talbot, c.12, fo. 1. The mission was abandoned after the capture of Sir Sidney Smith, another Grenville relative involved in secret service. See Michael Durey, 'The British secret service and the escape of Sir Sidney Smith from Paris in 1798', *History*, 84 (1999), pp. 437–57.

information on possible diplomatic contacts.[16] Talbot himself on one occasion took an unnecessary minor risk by walking around the walls of the Temple; he looked into the courtyard, 'but did not attempt to enter'. He took surreptitious pleasure in being falsely accused by the *Rédacteur*, the official government newspaper, of 'having been the head of a bureau of émigrés and to be particularly acquainted with all the ancient noblesse of France'.[17] The two months that Talbot spent in Paris, where he gained Malmesbury's approval, were sufficient to persuade Grenville to send him to Berne as Wickham's assistant.[18]

Although Talbot recognized that his isolated position in Switzerland required him to show 'a considerable degree of circumspection and caution',[19] his activities while working for Wickham suggest that he sometimes had found difficulty controlling his adventurous streak. Soon after his arrival in Berne, he brought attention to himself at a public ball: according to an amused Brook Taylor, it was reported to London that 'you not only embraced two ladies with whom you were dancing but did what my modesty will not allow me to mention'.[20] More worryingly, in late summer and without Wickham's knowledge, Talbot obtained a passport as a Swiss merchant and travelled to Milan, passing through two towns occupied by French troops and others which were being revolutionized. His aim, to see 'the principal *lion* of the place, General Buonaparte', was unfulfilled, for the conqueror of Italy was on his way to the peace negotiations at Rastadt, but Talbot did visit Josephine in her palace. After waiting several hours, he finally saw her, entering the room surrounded by admiring officers. She was, he thought, 'good looking but not handsome, rather plainly but becomingly dressed and seemed to be well in her manners'. Not wishing 'to become the companion of M. D'Antraigues' – the ultra-royalist agent whose controversial arrest the previous year had undermined Wickham's plans in Paris – Talbot slipped away without drawing attention to himself.[21]

Such reckless escapades suggest that Talbot was less suited to the role of spymaster, which required tact, caution, and the ability to direct policy from the shadows, than to the role of the adventurous secret agent. Wickham, to whom Talbot confessed on his return, nevertheless expressed confidence in his subordinate's capacity to replace him: 'whatever is entrusted to [Talbot]', he told Grenville, 'will be executed with equal industry and discretion'.[22]

[16] Malmesbury to Grenville, 23 Oct. 1796, *Dropmore papers*, III, pp. 262–3.

[17] Talbot's Diary, 28 Oct. 1796, MS Talbot, f.1, fos. 12–13.

[18] Malmesbury to Canning, 27 Oct. 1796, in *Diaries and correspondence of James Harris, first earl of Malmesbury*, ed. Third Earl of Malmesbury (4 vols., London, 1844), III, p. 292.

[19] Talbot to Buckingham, 1 Nov. 1797, MS Talbot, c.12, fo. 68.

[20] Brook Taylor to Talbot, 11 Apr. 1797, MS Talbot, c.12, fo. 50.

[21] Talbot to Buckingham, 23 Sept. 1797, MS Talbot, c.12, fos. 64–6. For D'Antraigues, see Jacques Godechot, *Le comte D'Antraigues: un espion dans l'Europe des émigrés* (Paris, 1986); Colin Duckworth, *The D'Antraigues phenomenon* (Newcastle, 1986).

[22] Wickham to Grenville, 29 Dec. 1797, Wickham, *Correspondence*, II, p. 67.

Mindful, like Malmesbury before him, of Talbot's connections with the Grenville clan, Wickham was perhaps unwilling to expose any doubts he may have had about Talbot's suitability. If so, both he and Grenville would later regret his reticence.

III

Ten days after Wickham left Berne, Talbot drafted a private letter to Grenville. The final version was sent to London in cipher. Six days later, on 24 November, he wrote to Brook Taylor, mentioning his previous letter to Grenville. According to Sparrow, these letters are key documents to support her contention that, after Fructidor, the British government 'gave free rein to the most violent royalists, with the result that the reformed [Swabian] agency, with its Paris subsidiary, was given backing to organise the assassination of the whole of the directory'.[23] To Grenville, Talbot offered his thoughts on the situation in the interior of France and unfolded a plan to overthrow the Directory. In his opinion, the vast majority of Frenchmen favoured changing the government, with most prepared to accept the restoration of Louis XVIII. If the legislative *conseils* could find the means to overthrow the Executive Directory, they would be supported by the mass of the people, who sought only security and repose. Unfortunately, however, even though only four or five members of the councils supported the Directory, the remainder were divided and had neither the resolution nor the courage to act. The solution, suggested Talbot, was for a band of resolute men to 'make themselves masters of the five Directors'. With power falling to the *conseils*, the monarchy could then be proclaimed.[24]

Three versions of this letter exist: a rough draft and a fair copy in Talbot's papers; and a deciphered version in Grenville's papers.[25] In addition, a final copy of Talbot's letter to Taylor may be found among Talbot's papers.[26] In this, Talbot suggested that he may have been irresponsible in offering 'a very wicked project of mine' to Grenville. He therefore asked Taylor, if he felt, after decipherment, that 'I have been guilty of a folly in the warmth of my zeal', not to pass on the letter of 18 November to Grenville.[27] As the letter has found its way into Grenville's papers, it may be presumed either that Taylor received Talbot's letter too late to carry out his request, or that he did not believe that Grenville would find its contents objectionable.[28]

From this cache of correspondence, Sparrow has drawn a number of important conclusions. First, she claims that 'Grenville's copy is identical with

[23] Sparrow, 'Swiss and Swabian agencies', p. 862.

[24] Talbot to Grenville, 18 Nov. 1797, final draft, MS Talbot, c.14.

[25] The deciphered version is in BL, Grenville papers, Add. MS 59011, fos. 129–37.

[26] Talbot to Taylor, 24 Nov. 1797, MS Talbot, c.12, fo. 70.

[27] Taylor, as Grenville's private secretary, was responsible for deciphering private correspondence. Canning was responsible for deciphering offical despatches.

[28] The Grenville letter was received at the foreign office on 8 Dec., at night. There is no confirmation that the letter to Taylor ever arrived (or was sent). If so, the presence of Grenville's letter in his archive means nothing. I am, however, assuming that the letter to Taylor was sent and was received.

Talbot's original [sic]'. Second, following on from that fact, she concludes that 'Grenville *had* approved' of Talbot's plan.[29] Thereafter for a year, the plot, '*tacitly* accepted with [Talbot's] appointment' to Swabia, gestated, without Grenville ever referring to it in correspondence.[30] Finally, Sparrow argues, by quoting from the letter to Taylor, that Talbot regarded his plan to be 'of great consequence'.[31] Two of these statements are wrong; the other, as a consequence, becomes extremely unlikely.

Far from the fair copy and the final letter sent to Grenville being identical, there are numerous differences between them. Some relate to minor changes Talbot must have made while enciphering the message; others are the result of Taylor failing to decipher it properly. Talbot admitted that he 'mangled it very much in reducing it to cypher',[32] with the result that Taylor could not make sense of whole sentences and frequently had to guess particular words. In one instance, instead of deciphering the comment that the exiled French deputies 'had the highest reputation amongst their colleagues', he came up with 'those of the highest repute groan in German colleges'. In another, in the crucial paragraph on the use of resolute men who to were to 'make themselves masters' of the Directory, he failed to make sense of the statement, crucial to the conspiracy, that the action should be carried out without the knowledge of the royalists in the *conseils*. No doubt, with some effort the main thrust of Talbot's plot could be ascertained, but the context and the justification for such a programme were considerably disfigured in the deciphering process.

The letter to Grenville appears to demonstrate Talbot's enthusiasm for the conspiracy in November 1797 and, according to Sparrow, this was confirmed by his letter to Taylor. In reality, however, Talbot was trying to play down his plan to Taylor. Far from writing that it was of great consequence, he actually wrote that 'it was of *no* great consequence'.[33] Thus, not only is the evidence for Grenville understanding the full implications of Talbot's conspiracy weak, but there is also strong evidence that at this stage Talbot himself did not take the plot very seriously. Talbot appealed to Taylor in November 1797 because he realized that Grenville might regard him as foolish for proposing such a reckless scheme and thus not fit to be trusted in sensitive areas of diplomacy. It is noteworthy that Talbot may have begun to have second thoughts even while enciphering his letter to Grenville: in the fair copy he gave himself the credit for devising the plan; in the cipher copy he attributes the plan to 'Count Reventlau', possibly a code name behind which hid a French royalist.[34] Nevertheless, the plot had been planted in Talbot's mind; his havering suggests his intellectual vulnerability to proposals of extreme political measures, to which subsequently he was to be introduced when he arrived in Swabia.

[29] Sparrow, 'Swiss and Swabian agencies', p. 870; idem, *Secret service*, p. 149.
[30] Sparrow, 'Swiss and Swabian agencies', p. 876 (my italics).
[31] Ibid., p. 870, footnote. [32] Talbot to Taylor, 24 Nov. 1797, MS Talbot, c.12, fo. 70.
[33] Ibid. (my italics).
[34] Although there were three Count Reventlows at this period (two Danish brothers and a cousin), it is highly unlikely that any was involved in counter-revolutionary plotting.

Sparrow's belief that Grenville supported the plot from late 1797 is based completely on her interpretation of these letters; there is no other corroborating evidence. It is clear, however, that these letters cannot be used in the way she wishes. The most that can be said is that Talbot sent Grenville the outlines of a conspiracy which he himself soon repudiated and that Grenville probably read a somewhat garbled version of the plot. There is no evidence to suggest that Grenville's silence hid a determination to assist in the assassination of the Directory. Thus Sparrow's view that there was a year-long conspiracy, officially sanctioned by the British government, cannot be sustained. This, of course, has serious implications for a proper understanding of Talbot's mission in Swabia.

IV

Talbot returned to England early in January 1798 to find that, despite the disasters of the past few months, Grenville was determined to pursue his strategy of winning the war by destroying the French revolutionaries in their own backyard, rather than, as Henry Dundas argued, by indirectly throttling the French war effort through the seizure of enemy colonies and the domination of world trade.[35] For Grenville, the struggle remained an ideological crusade, only to be won by the combination of a continental coalition and internal subversion, or, as William Windham reported him as saying in October 1797, by a French 'civil war, aided by war from without'.[36]

Grenville was strongly supported by Wickham, his trusted adviser on European affairs, who debriefed Talbot in London as soon as he arrived home.[37] Wickham had his own personal reasons for promoting a forward policy in Europe; his wife was Swiss and the safety of her family and Wickham's many friends in Switzerland was threatened by the prospective French invasion of the cantons. But he had also analysed the latest intelligence, sent by Talbot with his final despatch of 13 December, and this convinced him that all was not yet lost. Reports of the meeting of the proscribed deputies at Neuchâtel in November 1797, when combined with an overall assessment of the strategic possibilities of Austria's war party gaining influence in Vienna as the threat to Switzerland grew, suggested that there might be some value in reviving Wickham's 1797 policies with regard to the French interior. The reports, written by the former deputies Jean François Vauvilliers and Camille Jordan, exhorted Britain to continue its 'active though secret part in French affairs', by making 'common

[35] For the issues and positions, see A. B. Rodger, *The war of the Second Coalition, 1798–1801: a strategic commentary* (Oxford, 1964); Piers Mackesy, *Statesmen at war: the strategy of overthrow, 1798–1799* (London, 1974); Paul W. Schroeder, *The transformation of European politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford, 1994); John Erhman, *The younger Pitt: the consuming struggle* (London, 1996).

[36] *The Diary of the Right Hon. William Windham, 1784 to 1810*, ed. Mrs Henry Baring (London, 1866), p. 379. For the revolutionary wars as an ideological crusade for Grenville and other ministers, see Emma Vincent Macleod, *A war of ideas: British attitudes to the wars against revolutionary France, 1792–1802* (Aldershot, 1998), ch. 2.

[37] Wickham to Talbot, n.d. [Wednesday, early Jan. 1798], MS Talbot, b.22.

cause with the Moderate Party [in Paris], and to support that Party with effect as before the 4th September', i.e., before the coup of Fructidor. They also pointed to two other components of their overall plan: the possibility of a general insurrection in the southern departments of France if the continuation of the war forced the Directory to demand 'extraordinary requisitions'; and the preparations for 'a blow to be struck at Paris', for which, wrote Wickham, 'the Deputies say they have a plan prepared which they are ready to submit to the British Government'.[38]

It is possible, indeed likely, that this blow was a reference to the same plan Talbot had sent to Grenville in November, although it was now framed within a much broader and more conventional strategy of overthrow, with no reference to the members of the *conseils* being kept in the dark. It thus appeared to have the character of a coup d'état or *journée* rather than a *coup de main*. Wickham, however, made no further comment on it in his analysis, which suggests not only that he had no inkling that Grenville had previous knowledge of a plot, but also that Talbot had not referred to it in his debriefing. If, as Sparrow claims, Grenville was supporting the plot at this stage, it seems strange that he had not discussed it earlier with his main foreign policy adviser. Nor is there any evidence that the British government subsequently asked the émigrés directly for more details, as had been offered in the reports.

During this era a 'blow' was often used as a loose translation of the French phrase *coup de main*, which was also frequently to be found untranslated in English usage. But did it explicitly refer to assassination? *Coup de main* was usually used in a military context, to depict a sudden or surprise attack or raid. For instance, Sir Arthur Wellesley, the future duke of Wellington, when recommending the building of five forts in Ireland in 1801, wrote that they only needed to be 'of 2nd or 3rd class', strong enough 'to resist any attempt to carry them by a *coup de main*'.[39] It could also refer to the use of large forces, rather than a small group of raiders. Sir Robert Wilson, eagerly following the French retreat from Moscow with Russian troops in 1812, said he hoped to 'effect a *coup-de-main* against a corps of ten thousand Frenchmen'.[40] At the time of the Walcheren expedition, when the taking of Antwerp by a *coup de main* was being discussed in parliament, William Windham caused great amusement by commenting: 'Good God, Sir, talk of a *coup de main* with forty thousand men and thirty-three sail of the line! Gentlemen might as a well talk of a *coup de main* in the Court of Chancery.'[41] Even Wickham himself used the phrase in this sense. Following the Austrian army in Switzerland in 1799, he informed

[38] Official minute, foreign office, Feb. 1798, *Dropmore papers*, IV, pp. 117–19. The printed version of this paper is misdated. Internal evidence shows that it was drawn up before Talbot returned from Switzerland in early January.

[39] Quoted in *Diaries and correspondence of Charles Abbot, Lord Colchester*, ed. Charles, Lord Colchester (3 vols., London, 1861), I, p. 277.

[40] Quoted in Michael Glover, *A very slippery fellow: the life of Sir Robert Wilson, 1777–1849* (London, 1978), p. 120.

[41] *The Windham papers*, ed. Earl of Rosebery (2 vols., London 1913), I, p. xi.

Grenville that one side of Zurich was defended by a fort 'of sufficient strength to protect the town against a *coup-de-main*'.[42]

Yet the phrase could also be used outside the context of military tactics, to describe a sudden and possibly violent political, or paramilitary, action. Sir James Craufurd, for example, while British minister at Hamburg in 1798, at one point proposed 'an *act of vigour*' against some fugitive Irish rebels in the town. 'I do not mean to go to the length of *assassination*', he added.[43] When a few months later he suggested the clandestine kidnapping of two Irish rebel leaders and their secret return to Ireland, he called it a 'coup de main'.[44] It is clear, therefore, that contemporary views on the meaning of *coup de main* could differ and that it, and its synonym, a blow, could be interpreted in ways that could lead to misunderstanding. It certainly cannot be assumed that either phrase always referred to assassination.

Despite acknowledging that there was little new in the reports from the exiled deputies and recognizing that the primary issue for British policy ought to be support for a besieged Switzerland, Wickham nevertheless saw the émigrés' plans as the basis for future action, if the necessary *sine qua non*, a new European coalition, could be forged to renew the war on the continent.[45] After further thought, he offered as his 'firm opinion' the view that 'this Party [the Swabian Agency] ought not to be abandoned but that on the contrary we ought to make even large sacrifices to attach it to us by every possible tye [sic]'. An agent should be sent to liaise with them as soon as possible, for the émigrés had almost run out of funds.[46] He had, in fact, already discussed this possibility with Talbot.[47]

The mission that Grenville and Wickham decided upon had two interlocking objectives: a primary aim, secretly to assist those in Switzerland, especially in the canton of Berne, who were prepared to resist French incursions and the elevation of Swiss Jacobins to power; and a secondary aim, financially to support the exiled deputies so that they might strengthen their clandestine links with the French interior and continue to act as a conduit for political intelligence.[48] In some respects the mission would be more difficult than Wickham's had been, for the agent would have no diplomatic cover to hide behind and would need to live underground. Certainly, the agent would need a cool head and the resolution to withstand both the wiles and the wilder schemes of the émigrés. Although Talbot by now had many of the necessary operational skills and some experience of dealing with the deputies, his

[42] Wickham, *Correspondence*, II, p. 116.

[43] Craufurd to Wickham, 28 Aug. 1798, Wickham papers, Hampshire Record Office (HRO), 38M49/1/66/4.

[44] Craufurd to Grenville, 27 Nov. 1798, PRO FO33/16, fo. 192.

[45] Official minute, foreign office, Feb. 1798, *Dropmore papers*, IV, pp. 117–19.

[46] Wickham to Grenville, 29 Jan. 1798, PRO FO74/22; William M[ackintosh] to Talbot, 3 Jan. 1798, MS Talbot, b.22.

[47] Wickham to Grenville, 29 Jan. 1798, PRO FO74/22; Talbot to d'André, 26 Jan. 1798, MS Talbot, b.22, referring to Wickham as 'chef de notre ancienne maison de commerce'.

[48] Grenville to Talbot, 14 Feb. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 12–17.

temperament made him a hazardous choice. There was, however, no obvious alternative, except, perhaps, for Charles Flint, Talbot's predecessor as secretary to Wickham in Switzerland, but he was needed to help Wickham in his counter-espionage duties in the alien office.

Before he left for Swabia in mid-February, Talbot met Grenville twice to discuss the mission. After the first meeting, Talbot drew up a synopsis of the conversation, in which he interpreted his orders to include assisting in a renewed venture to support royalists in the elections to the French assemblies due in May, who would then mask their political sympathies until events warranted them taking 'the reins of government into their own hands'. He also understood the need 'to keep up a good understanding with the refugee deputies'.[49] Following the second meeting, Grenville issued his formal instructions for Talbot.[50] Most of these referred to the Swiss situation, but Grenville also gave orders relating to the French émigrés. Only if war broke out between France and Switzerland should Talbot involve himself in measures taken by the émigrés to undermine the Directory in the southern and eastern provinces of France. If, on the other hand, some 'temporary accommodation' was made between France and Switzerland, 'which does not destroy the independence and tranquillity of Switzerland', Talbot should confine himself to strengthening lines of communication with the French interior and to supporting the royalists' election plans. In other words, Talbot's instructions conformed to Wickham's recommendations in the official foreign office minute.

No mention was made of the émigrés' proposed blow in Paris. According to Sparrow, this was 'a deliberate omission – no minister would permit a written record authorizing assassinations'.[51] Undoubtedly, all sensible ministers or officials involved in dangerous plots would seek to keep a healthy distance between themselves and the smoking gun, yet even silent approval for such a scheme ought to have left some spoor, especially in the Treasury or audit office archives, for Talbot could not have supported the plot without access to very large amounts of secret service money. Under the 1782 Civil List Act (23 Geo. III c. 82), although details on how it was expended was not necessary, government officials had to produce receipts for all secret service money spent and had to swear an oath that it had been disbursed 'faithfully according to the interest and purpose for which it was given'.[52] As David Wilkinson has shown when considering the improper spending of home office secret service money in Ireland during the Union crisis, the requirement of this oath loomed large in the minds of ministers who might be personally liable if funds went astray or were proven to be improperly allocated.[53] Thus, if Grenville had intended Talbot to support the assassination plot, he would certainly have given him

[49] Talbot to Grenville, 5 Feb. 1798 (draft), MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 7.

[50] Grenville to Talbot, 14 Feb. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 12–17.

[51] Sparrow, 'Swiss and Swabian agencies', pp. 871–2; Sparrow, *Secret service*, p. 150.

[52] Talbot's oath, dated 20 Feb. 1800, PRO HD1/1.

[53] David Wilkinson, '"How did they pass the Union?": secret service expenditure in Ireland, 1799–1804', *History*, 82 (1997) pp. 223–51.

access to the necessary funds at the beginning of his mission. Some evidence of this would necessarily have remained in the audit office archives, among all the other evidence of Talbot's expenses during his mission. No such evidence, however, can be found. In reality, Grenville explicitly limited Talbot's financial powers. Under Grenville's instructions, before leaving England Talbot sent d'André £20,000 to keep the clandestine lines of communication open with France.[54] But thereafter he was limited to spending a further £10,000 and, even then, he was told to draw it only 'under circumstances of unforeseen exigency'. You will not, reiterated Grenville, 'make use of this permission unless in case of real necessity'.[55] As Mitchell has rightly pointed out, compared with Wickham, Talbot was forced to work on a shoestring.[56] There was no way he could have financed an assassination plot with the money at his disposal.

V

Talbot arrived in Ulm on 2 March 1798 with his younger brother Robert, who was to be his secretary, cipher clerk, and messenger, on a mission that was probably unprecedented. Like Wickham in 1794, he had set off from England with instructions unknown to anyone in the foreign office, except Grenville and Canning, but, unlike Wickham, he and his brother were to live under assumed names – James and Robert Tindal – and had no official character (his cover story, for home and, if necessary, foreign consumption, was that he was en route to St Petersburg as secretary of legation).[57] As Talbot recognized, he was a 'secret agent',[58] but he also had the responsibilities of a diplomat and commissary, even if the Swiss with whom he was to liaise were now an opposition resistance. His role, decidedly ambiguous from the outset, was to be decided by events. If war broke out between the Swiss Confederation and France, he was to do all in his power to assist the Swiss, including fomenting counter-revolution in the French interior; if some 'accommodation' between the Swiss and the French were achieved, he was to confine himself to gaining intelligence from France. Unfortunately, his instructions were out of date by the time he reached Swabia and gave him little assistance to deal with the situation confronting him: the cantons revolutionized from within; a French army welcomed into the lowland regions of Switzerland by the Swiss Jacobins; and no official declaration of war. Within days of arrival Talbot was reporting the capitulation of Berne, the canton from which both Grenville and Wickham had expected the strongest resistance to the revolutionary contagion.[59]

[54] Talbot to Grenville, 6 Feb. 1797 [1798], PRO FO74/22; receipt, dated 12 Feb. 1798, attached to audit office queries [1801], PRO HD1/1.

[55] Grenville to Talbot, 14 Feb. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 17.

[56] Mitchell, *Underground war*, p. 221.

[57] Grenville to George III, 8 Feb. 1798, in *The later correspondence of George III*, ed. A. Aspinall (5 vols., Cambridge, 1967), III, p. 18; Grenville to Sir Charles Whitworth, 20 Feb. 1798, *Dropmore papers*, IV, pp. 95–6.

[58] Talbot to Grenville, 5 Feb. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 8.

[59] Talbot to Canning, no. 2, 10 Mar. 1798, PRO 74/22 (draft in MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 22–6).

No better news came from his first meeting with the leaders of Louis XVIII's newly created Swabian agency.[60] They reported that, following the law of 12 pluviôse An VI (31 January 1798), which gave the outgoing legislature in Paris the power to decide on the validity of the election of incoming deputies, Talbot's aim to influence the May elections would have no chance of success.[61] Within a week of arriving in Swabia, therefore, all that unquestionably remained of Talbot's instructions was the order to garner intelligence from the French interior, a process that was already in place and being funded from the £20,000 that Talbot had sent to d'André. Talbot was faced with the prospect of becoming no more than a letter box, receiving and passing on to London the news from France.

This was hardly the dashing role Talbot had hoped to play. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that he was open to suggestions from the *pur* royalists, anxious to inveigle Talbot into their desperate and violent schemes. Their first step was to convince Talbot that, despite the weakness of the royalists in the interior, it would be possible secretly to support the Jacobins in the elections and thereafter take advantage of any convulsions that might ensue. This *royalisme à bonnet rouge*, as Directory propaganda neatly termed it,[62] was not quite such an absurd and impractical strategy as some historians have suggested (a comparison might be made, for instance, with the strategy of the communist resistance in occupied France during the Second World War, when they hoped to take advantage of the disruption caused by the resistance activities of Gaullist and allied-supported *réseaux*).[63] Tentative overtures to royalists, suggesting an alliance against the common enemy, were in fact made in Paris, but they were more the result of frustration amongst a tiny group of Jacobin intellectuals, who had seen their electoral efforts stymied by the Directory's determination to protect their position by once again riding roughshod over the constitution of the Year III, than evidence of a genuine Jacobin desire for unity of action.[64]

Despite initial reservations, however, Talbot was soon caught up in the Swabian agency's machinations. In his initial despatches to London he tended to take a neutral line, reporting without comment the hopes and aspirations of

[60] The leaders were Antoine-Balthazar, baron d'André (Wickham's confidant), Louis-François Perrin de Précy (whom Grenville trusted for his caution), Joseph-Luc-Jean, président de Vezet (an antediluvian royalist, titular head of the agency), and the abbé Jean-François André, aka *La Marre*. *La Marre* was in England when Talbot met the others together for the first time at the abbey of Salmansweiler. Marquis Dugon, *Au service du roi en exil* (Paris, 1968), p. 174.

[61] Talbot to Canning, no. 3 draft, 13 Mar. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 28.

[62] Isser Woloch, *Jacobin legacy: the democratic movement under the Directory* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 277–8.

[63] Mitchell, *Underground war*, p. 223; Sparrow, *Secret service*, pp. 159–60. As late as June 1803 the possibility of a Jacobin–royalist alliance was being discussed in British political circles, from which 'a revolution might be operated'. Malmesbury told Lord Pelham that this had been a possibility from August 1797. Malmesbury, *Diaries*, 10 June 1803, IV, p. 265.

[64] Talbot to Canning, 14 June 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 106; D. M. G. Sutherland, *France, 1789–1815: revolution and counterrevolution* (London, 1985), pp. 309–10.

the royalists. He also declared his determination to keep the Swabian agency's leaders at arms length, dampening their hopes of receiving financial backing.[65] Within six weeks, however, he was expressing 'the most perfect approbation of the conduct of these gentlemen. I find them extremely reasonable in every respect.'[66] Talbot was hooked, a victim of that which Talleyrand called the supreme vice of diplomacy: an excess of zeal. In the draft of his ninth despatch, dated 3 May, he wrote, for enciphering, that 'Some of the proscribed French Deputies have conceived the project of striking a blow in Paris by a body of resolute men'. *En clair*, he continued,

> They have communicated it to me and although I foresaw the greatest difficulty of the execution of it in the present state of things, I did not judge it expedient to refuse them pecuniary assistance, under the idea that every shock of whatever nature soever, although it may not immediately produce the desired effect, serves to convince the nation, while it offers even a possibility of success, of the instability of the present order of things.[67]

A fortnight later Talbot informed London, again in cipher, that he had sent £10,000 to Paris, to be 'ready in case of any hidden and important demand which the present state of things may give birth to'.[68]

Three points need to be made about the formulation of these particular despatches. First, while drafting despatch no. 9 Talbot certainly had an assassination plot in mind, the one which, as Sparrow has shown, d'André reported to Louis XVIII's council in Mittau later in the month and which was separate from, if ultimately linked to, the broader intrigues of *le travail*, the royalist agency in Paris.[69] Second, the deciphering process again intervened between what Talbot wrote and what Grenville was able to read. Whereas Talbot's draft of despatch no. 9 refers, as above, to 'a body of resolute men', the version as deciphered at the foreign office omits that crucial phrase.[70] Whatever the reason for this – whether Talbot or his brother deliberately left out this part of the message, or whether it was poorly deciphered – the effect was to allow multiple or alternative readings of the report, deflecting attention away from 'the blow' as a specific assassination plot towards the likelihood of it referring to part of a more general *journée* or insurrection. That Talbot may have done this deliberately, in order to keep Grenville in ignorance, remains speculative, but he must have known that his decision to finance the plot was questionable, given the fact that his instructions allowed him to use the £10,000 only 'under

[65] Talbot to Canning, 13, 30 Mar. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 28–9, 58. Louis's agents thought Talbot, at this point, was 'timid and unwilling to act'. Dugon, *Au service du roi en exil*, p. 193.

[66] Talbot to Canning, 21 Apr. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 72.

[67] *Tindal* to Canning (draft), 3 May 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 79.

[68] Talbot to Canning, 16 May 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 88.

[69] Sparrow, *Secret service*, p. 155.

[70] *Tindal* to Canning, 3 May 1798, PRO FO74/22. As Sparrow, in her book, gives the wrong footnote reference, it is unclear whether she is aware that the draft and the final version of this despatch are different.

circumstances of unforeseen exigency'.[71] How he proceeded would depend on the response he received from London.

Despatch no. 9 reached the foreign office on 22 May; Grenville replied to it and the previous despatches two days later (he thus did not know at this point that the £10,000 had been sent to Paris, the next despatch with this news not arriving until 9 June). In the circumstances, it would be fair to say that those parts of the despatches referring to the internal affairs of France were not given the highest priority in London. Although Wickham, in his secret service capacity, still offered an experienced guiding hand in foreign affairs, his energies were being mainly expended on his duties as undersecretary at the home office, with responsibility for counter-espionage in Ireland, where the rebellion had just broken out, and in England and Scotland. Moreover, Grenville had just begun to receive intelligence from another major source within France, a network established by Sir Sidney Smith before he escaped from France.[72] This avenue promised more up-to-date intelligence from better-placed sources than Talbot's, as the lines of communication went directly from Paris to London. Indeed, as the exiled deputies soon came to realize, this new network would marginalize Talbot's enterprise in the eyes of the foreign office.[73] Finally, it was Talbot's activities relating to crisis-torn Switzerland – in particular, his promise to aid the smaller Swiss cantons if they rose in insurrection – rather than his vague French news that caught Grenville's attention when reading the despatches. Grenville's response (despatch no. 4), in which he invoked the king's name, was crushing: it was 'highly improper' of Talbot to promise financial help, for it would only lead to 'useless slaughter'. Talbot was ordered to stay on the frontier, to get intelligence on the internal situation in Switzerland. No specific mention, however, was made of Talbot's French plans.[74] At this point, therefore, Grenville and Talbot were moving along different lines, the former totally focused on Switzerland, the latter – under the influence of the agency – giving as much priority to France as to Switzerland.

A further complication was the apparent failure of Grenville's fourth despatch to reach Talbot directly. On 13 July Grenville sent Talbot another copy, with the terse statement, 'I have at present nothing to add ... [and] desire that you will conform yourself to the instructions [relating to Switzerland] contained in [no. 4].'[75] Thus two months elapsed between Talbot

[71] See above, p. 558.

[72] Durey, 'Escape of Sir Sidney Smith', pp. 456–7. The first reports were received in May.

[73] Talbot to Canning, 30 July 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 137–8; Dugon, *Au service du roi en exil*, pp. 186, 193–4.

[74] Grenville to Talbot, 24 May 1798, PRO FO74/22 (MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 93).

[75] Grenville to Talbot, 13 July 1798, PRO FO74/22. Only one copy of this despatch is in Talbot's papers. Talbot acknowledged 'a degree of dissatisfaction' by Grenville with his conduct, after his brother Robert returned from his first trip to London in mid-September. Wickham seems to have warned Robert of Grenville's displeasure. Talbot to Grenville, private, Talbot to Canning, 28 Sept. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 173, 175.

writing despatch no. 9 and his receiving a response, a long hiatus during the summer months, when the mail travelled relatively quickly. By the time Grenville's despatch arrived Talbot had again seemingly reverted to the wider strategy, reporting to London royalist plans that involved them remaining 'upon the watch' in order 'to concentrate their means in such a manner as to enable them to avail themselves of any commotion [stirred up by the Jacobins] which may take place. They are advised to continue at present quiet.' To be sure, Talbot mentioned a *coup de main*, but once more it referred to a blow within a larger conspiracy, triggered in this case by the Jacobins.[76] Talbot's own expressed concerns about the practicality of this strategy involving both extreme groups must have left Grenville, who viewed Talbot's mission as purely an intelligence-gathering operation, with the impression that it remained merely a speculative idea with few possible consequences.[77] More important, the separate plan to assassinate the Directory remained masked behind a wider conspiracy that conformed to elements of Wickham's grand plan of 1795–7, namely the co-ordination of widespread internal insurrections with an invasion by Austria.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the few despatches Grenville sent to Talbot – he sent only six in 1798, compared with the thirty-four he received from Talbot – he did not explicitly order Talbot to refrain from involvement in the various plots put up by the royalists within France. From his perspective, Grenville probably did not feel the need to do more than briefly remind Talbot of his original instructions, which he did, twice, and with some asperity.[78] After all, there was no expectation in 1798 that Austria would resume the war and therefore no immediate opportunity to resurrect the grand plan. From Talbot's perspective, however, the absence of a specific response from the foreign office could be interpreted as silent acquiescence in his schemes, which were not premised on Austrian intervention but assumed success to be achievable by internal convulsions alone.[79]

Of most importance would have been London's failure to comment on Talbot's decision to send the £10,000 to Paris. Why the significance of this action was not picked up can only be surmised. Perhaps Grenville assumed the money was being spent only on intelligence-gathering, which was the original intention, or perhaps he was confused by Talbot's various requests for money, for the despatches usually never made clear whether Talbot was seeking to finance operations in Switzerland or in France. Sparrow's own interpretation

[76] Talbot to Canning, 12 July 1798 (received 3 Aug.), PRO FO74/22.

[77] Talbot to Canning, 31 Aug. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 153.

[78] Wickham reiterated this point in a private letter to Talbot, dated 13 Sept. 1798: 'Remember only and I cannot repeat it too often, that *Intelligence* will be prized here far beyond everything else that you can send.' MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 162.

[79] Talbot to Canning, 28 Sept. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 177–8; Talbot to Grenville, private, 19 Feb. 1799, MS Talbot, b.27, fo. 38. One half of this first despatch, in which Talbot pointed out that he had received no comment on his French plans, was indecipherable. Canning to Talbot, 23 Oct. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 190.

suggests that this sort of confusion was possible at the foreign office. She has claimed that Talbot's request in late July for bills of exchange or access to credit facilities, as the 'crisis may occur soon', related only to Paris, and that Grenville agreed to supply the money with that destination in mind, yet Talbot's appeal was decidedly ambiguous, coming in the context of his assertion that he had lost no opportunity of forwarding Britain's policy both in France (not Paris specifically) and in Switzerland. The money that he reported as having deposited in Lyon, 'in case of any important demand', could just as easily have been transferred across the frontier to Switzerland as back to Paris.[80]

Responsibility for these misunderstandings as late as August and September must lie partly with Grenville. In extenuation, he was distracted by events in Hamburg, which had suddenly become a hotbed of intrigue and espionage, filled with exiled Irish rebels.[81] He was also in the process of breaking off negotiations for an alliance with Austria and thus the grand plan of an Austrian invasion of France in conjunction with widespread insurrections in the French interior – which remained, in London's eyes, the framework of the French part of Talbot's mission – was not in the forefront of his mind.[82]

Canning too, perhaps, must share some of the blame. In-coming despatches arrived first on his desk; he was responsible for deciphering and for preparing the official post for Grenville. It was a laborious and frustrating job, with surges of great activity following the simultaneous arrival of bulky and multiple despatches from various European countries, held up at Cuxhaven by bad weather.[83] Although cordial, his relations with Grenville – a notoriously cold and straitlaced character – had deteriorated during the Lille peace negotiations in 1797 and thereafter his enthusiasm for his role in the foreign office waned.[84] In October 1798 he informed Pitt that he was tired of his position and asked to be relieved.[85] On resigning in March 1799, Canning happily informed his cousin that he would go 'frisking and flourishing about, so happy in my new liberty, after three years of such slavery as never was slaved'.[86] With his mind not fully on the job – he established the *Anti-Jacobin* magazine during this period – it is perhaps not surprising that evidence of sloppy and unprofessional work practices in the foreign office exists: despatches were not fully digested; translations were slow; and even secret messages, written in lemon juice on the covers of letters, were destroyed without being read.[87]

[80] Sparrow, *Secret service*, p. 166; Talbot to Canning, 30 July 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 136–7.
[81] Paul Weber, *On the road to rebellion: the United Irishmen and Hamburg, 1796–1803* (Dublin, 1997).
[82] Karl A. Roider, Jr, *Baron Thugat and Austria's response to the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1987), p. 288.
[83] Sir Charles Petrie, *George Canning* (London, 1946), p. 37.
[84] Wendy Hinde, *George Canning* (London, 1973), pp. 56–7.
[85] Peter Dixon, *George Canning politician and statesman* (New York, 1976), pp. 38–9.
[86] Quoted in Petrie, *Canning*, p. 48.
[87] Canning to Talbot, 22 Mar. 1799, MS Talbot, b.27, fo. 73.

VI

On 16 December 1798 Robert Talbot, sore and weary after a stormy sea passage of seven days and six nights between Cuxhaven and Yarmouth,[88] arrived at the foreign office, carrying a bulky despatch and two private letters from his brother. He could not have caused more consternation if he had been carrying an infernal machine, for the despatch contained a long account of the progress of the assassination plot in Paris and James Talbot's part in its preparation. From an historiographical point of view, despatch no. 31 is very instructive, for if, as Sparrow maintains, a conspiratorial plot between Grenville and Talbot had been hatched nearly a year earlier, why did Talbot write *en clair* about it at length in an official despatch, which Grenville would have to show to the king and even, perhaps, to other cabinet ministers and privy councillors? Furthermore, why, in an accompanying private letter to Grenville, did Talbot 'beg a thousand pardons for the trouble I now give your Lordship'?[89] The short answer is that in November, after having committed himself and, more importantly, having raised a great deal of money without Grenville's knowledge or assent, to support a cause that appealed to his adventurous streak, he had suddenly had second thoughts, possibly because Précy, whom Grenville trusted for his caution and commonsense, was hostile to the plan.[90] Moreover, Talbot realized that, having borrowed large unsanctioned sums on behalf of the government, he needed to justify them to his master and explain why he had gone beyond his instructions. The strategy of openly describing the royalists' plot in an official despatch, yet at the same time placing it within a precisely defined context, would at least force Grenville to make a clear and definite response, something which had been lacking during the previous months. Rather than this despatch confirming that Grenville had supported the plot throughout 1798, it shows that Talbot did not know what Grenville's views were, but desperately wanted to find out.

The catalyst for Talbot's decision to enlighten Grenville was his interview in Augsburg, a few days before he wrote despatch no. 31, with Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, d'André's principal Parisian agent and one of the four conspirators who were expected to take control in Paris if the plot were successful.[91] The smooth-talking Royer-Collard, whose intelligence reports from Paris had 'less enthusiasm and more just reasoning than any other from the same quarter', convinced Talbot that 'the public opinion has been at no period since the commencement of the Revolution so decidedly pronounced as at this moment'. The popularity of republicanism was in precipitate decline; 'the general wish is to be simply the restoration of the ancient monarchy'. With the Directory in disarray; state finances in a ruinous state; recruitment to the army unpopular;

[88] *James Tindal* to Sir Arthur Paget, 21 Jan. 1799, BL, Add. MS 48394, fo. 93.
[89] Talbot to Grenville, 26 Nov. 1798, PRO FO74/22.
[90] Talbot to Canning, 9 Dec. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 219; Grenville to Talbot, 15 Mar. 1799, MS Talbot, b.27, fo. 59.
[91] Sparrow, *Secret service*, p. 174.

the Parisian sections and most departments prepared to rise; and several generals and 200–300 officers in Paris to be counted on, the royalists were confident that 'they shall find sufficient *support* in case they should succeed in overthrowing the Directory'. The spark to set this insurrection off would be an attack on the Directors themselves by a group of men who were available from various departments in the country. 'They only wait for orders to repair to their destination.'[92]

Of the plot itself, Talbot boldly informed Grenville:

> The mode proposed for its execution whenever matters shall be sufficiently mature is to assemble in the vicinity of the metropolis but so dispersed as not to occasion any suspicion of their intention, the body of men destined for the coup de main. They are not to be suffered to enter Paris for fear of accidents more than four and twenty hours before the time appointed for employing them. Should they succeed in making away with the Directory it is then the intention to have the tocsin sounded to assemble the sections, declare the King and despatch couriers immediately into all departments; to abolish the councils without delay and vest the government in a commission of four persons who shall exercise it in the name of the King until the arrival of His Majesty.

So convincing was Royer-Collard, continued Talbot,

> that I am almost tempted to flatter myself that it may be attended with success. I have consequently in conformity with the language I have all along held, viz. that His Majesty would not be backward in granting the funds necessary to put in execution any undertaking which offered a reasonable chance of restoring order to that long distracted country, pledged myself to furnish the full of the demand made by this gentleman.[93]

The cost, estimated Talbot, would be about 'a million of French livres' (approximately £40,000).

There was enough truth in this analysis of the situation in France to hide the big lie at its centre: despite the directory's unpopularity and widespread unrest, public opinion did not favour the *pur* royalists and a return to the *ancien régime*. Talbot's desperate aim, however, was to convince Grenville that the plan conformed closely to the grand plan of 1795–7 and that, therefore, he had not gone beyond his instructions. This required ignoring the *sine qua non* of both Wickham's plan and Talbot's instructions, war between Austria and France, and justifying the assassination plot as a substitute for the role of the moderate party in the councils, which, claimed Talbot, 'had so vilified itself in the publick opinion by its pusillanimity ... that it has long lost every shadow of influence'.[94]

Grenville, understandably, was not impressed. As Sparrow rightly points out, he would have been personally liable for the debt incurred in France once the Treasury realized that Talbot had gone beyond his instructions.[95] Fortunately, however, although the money had been placed in various accounts in France, it had not yet been drawn upon. Nor was there much likelihood of

[92] Talbot to Grenville, 25 Nov. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 205–8.
[93] Ibid., fos. 208–10. [94] Ibid., fo. 202. [95] Sparrow, *Secret service*, p. 169.

it being used in the immediate future, for Royer-Collard thought that the royalists needed '*a strong motive*', such as the outbreak of war or 'any measure of sufficient violence' by the Directory 'to give an additional spur to the public imagination'. It might be the spring of 1799 before the explosion occurred.[96] This gave Grenville some leeway, a lucky circumstance, for, with the weather in the North Sea so severe that Cuxhaven remained ice-bound for the second half of December and the whole of January, there was no opportunity to send an immediate message to Talbot.[97] It was thus not until 25 January that Grenville prepared his response, which, although exonerating Talbot from anything other than an excess of zeal 'for the advantage of your country', nevertheless ordered him 'to lose no time in entirely and distinctly putting an end to the negotiation in question'.[98]

VII

Assassinations, or at least, threats of assassinations, were not uncommon in these years; they were usually the response of disappointed and desperate men of extreme political persuasions, both from the left and the right. In England, Wickham was reported to be the potential victim of displaced Frenchmen, angry at the prospect of being deported under the provisions of the Aliens Act.[99] United Irishmen in London targeted both William Pitt and George III.[100] Disaffected patriots sought to assassinate Frenchmen in Switzerland.[101] Talbot and his royalist cronies fitted this pattern, except that they supposedly had the weight and influence of the British foreign secretary behind them. Grenville, however, makes an incongruous accessory to assassination. Although no one in the British cabinet was more ideologically committed to the downfall of revolutionary France and only William Windham more ruthless in pursuit of a strategy to embroil the French in a destructive civil war, Grenville drew the line at the prospect of deliberately targeting the legitimate rulers of France, with whom twice he had been involved in peace negotiations in recent years.[102] If his response to Talbot – the plot was 'wholly abhorrent from the sentiments of Honour and humanity which ... become the character of a civilized Nation,

[96] Talbot to Canning, 25 Nov. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fos. 210–11.

[97] *Dropmore papers*, IV, p. xxxii. Grenville's brother, on mission to Prussia, was forced back to Yarmouth in December. On his second voyage in February he was shipwrecked off the German coast.

[98] Grenville to Talbot, 25 Jan. 1799, PRO FO74/23. Sparrow, 'Swiss and Swabian agencies', p. 879, argues that Grenville only brought the plot to an end after the arrest in Dover of Lord Camelford, his close kinsman, earlier in January, while he was in the process of finding a boat for France, possibly in order to assassinate the Director, Barras. Although Grenville was acutely embarrassed by this episode, it did not cause him to abandon a plot in which he had had no part. For Camelford's expedition, see Nikolai Tolstoy, *The half-mad lord: Thomas Pitt, 2nd Baron Camelford, (1775–1804)* (London, 1978).

[99] James Craufurd to Wickham, 14 Sept. 1798, HRO 38M49/1/66/7.

[100] Wickham to Edward Cooke, 23 Mar. 1799, Wickham to Lord Castlereagh, 26 Mar. 1799, PRO HO 100/86, fos. 179, 198–9.

[101] Sparrow, *Secret service*, p. 161.

[102] For Windham, see *The Windham papers*, II, p. 2 and passim.

and are necessary for the preservation of the Laws and rights of civilized War'[103] – is viewed merely as evidence of his duplicity, as Sparrow suggests, his reply to Sir James Craufurd, when he proposed kidnapping the rebel Irish leader James Napper Tandy in Hamburg at this time, cannot be ignored: 'I can by no means think it right that any of the King's Ministers should engage in Plans of this nature which generally end in the Death of the Persons intended to be seized.'[104]

Rather than the foreign office being surreptitiously involved in a long-term violent conspiracy in 1798, Britain's secret and undercover policy towards France remained substantially unchanged between 1795 and 1800. What was new in 1798 was the rogue strategy undertaken by Talbot, which Grenville and Canning did not comprehend until Talbot finally came clean in December. As Wickham explained to Gen. Pichegru in May 1799, 'the dissolution of the Swabian agency was only caused by intrigues which it was impossible to unravel from here [London]'.[105]

Talbot, on the other hand, was to claim in mitigation that the plan he undertook to finance 'differed in few particulars except in its immediate consequences from what was meditated before 4 September 1797'.[106] Whether he truly believed this remains moot, for in reality there were very substantial differences between Wickham's grand plan and Talbot's. In particular, the abandonment of the moderates in the *conseils* and their replacement in the plan by a group of assassins not only altered the character of the proposed explosion in Paris, changing it from a 'legal' political coup to a potential bloodbath, but also left the constitutional monarchists and other moderates out in the cold. Wickham's plan involved incorporating all political elements in opposition to the Directory; Talbot's excluded all but the extreme left and the extreme right. This greatly increased the risk of a successful insurrection ultimately falling into the hands of the Jacobins.

Moreover, Britain's underground strategy within revolutionary France was always premised on a conjunction with external war and the prospect of an Austrian, or coalition, invasion of French territory. Although Talbot subsequently claimed that he was preparing for the moment when there would be 'a speedy renewal of hostilities', in reality he had acknowledged earlier that 'this project does not seem to depend solely upon the recommencement of hostilities'.[107] Throughout his mission Talbot had consistently argued that 'any shock in the interior of France ultimately tends to produce a favourable change'.[108]

In the event, there were few immediate untoward consequences from this episode. Sir Sidney Smith's 'Julie Caron' network continued to send regular

[103] Grenville to Talbot, 25 Jan. 1799, PRO FO74/23.
[104] Grenville to Craufurd, 1 Dec. 1798, PRO FO33/16, fo. 217.
[105] Wickham to *Major Perou* [Pichegru], 21 May 1799, Wickham, *Correspondence*, II, p. 101.
[106] Talbot to Grenville, private, 19 Feb. 1799, MS Talbot, b.27, fo. 38.
[107] Ibid.; Talbot to Canning, 25 Nov. 1798, MS Talbot, c.15, fo. 211.
[108] Talbot to Grenville, private and confidential, 25 Aug. 1799, MS Talbot, b.27, fo. 109.

and useful intelligence from Paris during the period of the second coalition.[109] The Swabian agents, after their bellows of indignation had died down, were soon again offering assistance to Wickham when he returned to the continent in July 1799. But the concept of assassination as a viable political tool had taken root among the *pur* royalists and was to be resurrected, with disastrous consequences, when the war was renewed in 1803 and a more malleable minister, Lord Hawkesbury, was sitting in the foreign office. It was the product of a raging despair among the extreme royalists and of the success of Bonaparte's policy of inveigling émigrés back to France during the period of peace.

Remarkably, there was no financial loss to the government as a result of Talbot's adventures. All the money that he had illegally raised and transferred to France was eventually returned. It was subsequently discovered that a profit had been made from accrued interest and fluctuations in the exchange rate, which suggests that Talbot's continued confidence in the royalists' rectitude was not totally naïve.[110] Grenville, aware that the reputations of his family and the foreign office were at stake, and no doubt feeling pangs of guilt for having left his kinsman alone, unsupported and prey to the wiles and rivalries of the *pur* royalists in a hostile environment, soon transferred Talbot to Sweden, initially as secretary of legation but subsequently as envoy extraordinary.[111]

Talbot, for his part, twice wrote privately to Grenville after notice of his recall, once from Augsburg (in lemon juice) and once after returning to England, in an attempt to explain his actions.[112] Although he could easily have done so, in neither did he defend himself by referring to secret instructions given to him by Grenville or Wickham, either before he left for Swabia or subsequently. Indeed, if there had been a conspiracy between Grenville and Talbot, there would have been no reason to have written at all.

In 1803, before the war with France recommenced, Talbot was working for Sir Charles Whitworth at the embassy in Paris. Shortly after his arrival he was visited by an Irishman called Turner, who claimed to have been a spy for Wickham in Hamburg and was again seeking employment. Talbot refused to have anything to do with him. 'It is of the utmost importance', he informed Wickham rather pompously, 'that HM Mission should not ever be suspected of dabbling in any intrigues whatsoever'.[113] Perhaps Talbot, too, had learnt a lesson from his mission to Swabia, even though it meant leaving out in the cold Samuel Turner, one of Britain's most effective spies in this era, and rendering Britain unprepared for Emmet's rebellion in Ireland.

[109] Durey, 'Escape of Sir Sidney Smith', pp. 456–7; Jean Hyde de Neuville, *Mémoires et souvenirs du Baron Hyde de Neuville* (Paris, 1888). The reports of abbé Ratel (*Julie Caron*) are available in PRO FO 27/53.

[110] See Talbot to George Hammond, 20 May 1802, enclosed Note B, dated Downing Street, 20 Feb. 1801, PRO HD1/1.

[111] Grenville to Talbot, 21 Mar. 1799, MS Talbot, b.27, fo. 68; D. Hailes to Grenville, 9 Dec. 1799, *Dropmore papers*, VI, p. 64; Grenville to Talbot, 28 Feb. 1800, MS Talbot, c.16, fo. 1.

[112] Talbot to Grenville, 19 Feb., private draft, in lemon juice, 25 Aug. 1799, private and confidential draft, MS Talbot, b.27, fos. 37–9, 106–10.

[113] Talbot to Wickham, 29 Mar. 1803, HRO 38M49/5/36/3.